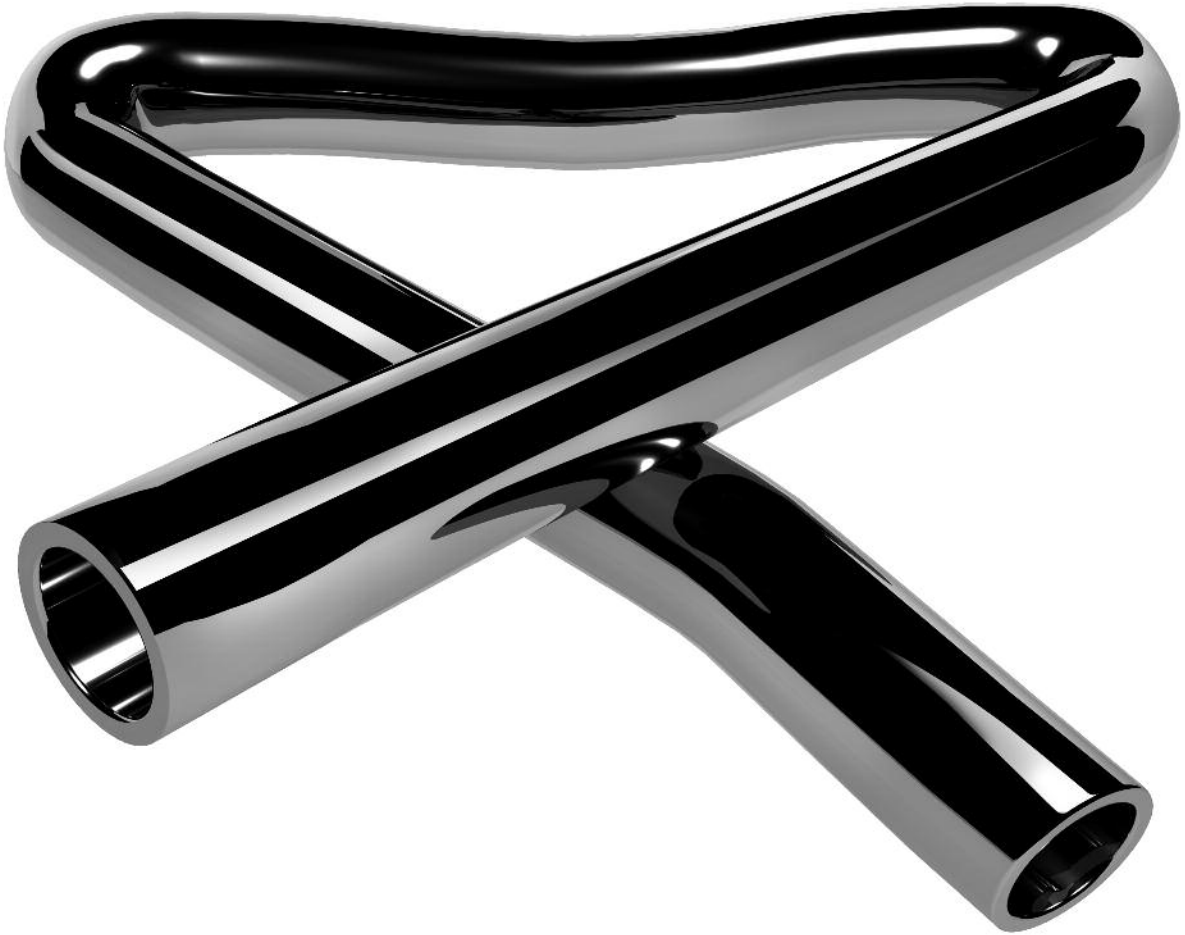
TUBULAR BELLS

Mike Oldfield



iTunes Deluxe Digital Edition

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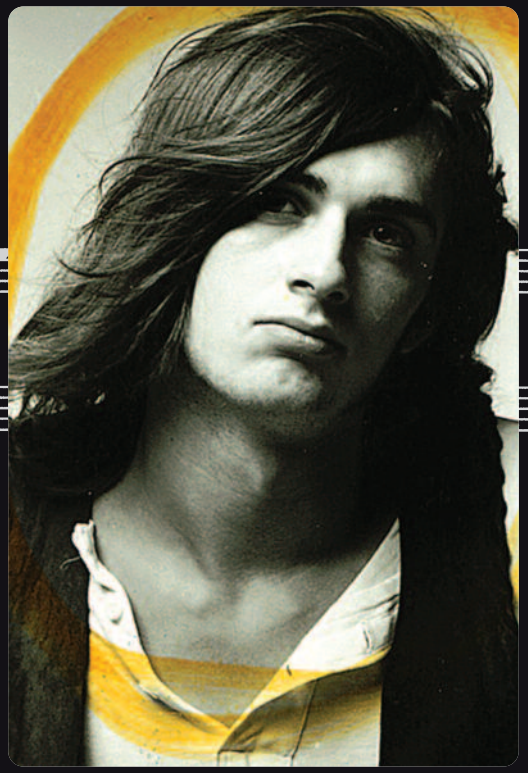


All tracks written by Mike Oldfield and published by Universal Music, except 'Sailor's Hornpipe' - Traditional/Arranged Mike Oldfield

The 2009 stereo mixes by Mike Oldfield

1 Tubular Bells {Part One} 25:37
2 Tubular Bells {Part Two} 23:20
3 Mike Oldfield's Single 4:33
A-side originally released in June 1974
4 Sailor's Hornpipe 3:22
(original version with Viv Stanshall)
Recorded at The Manor in Spring 1973

The original 1973 stereo album mix

5 Tubular Bells {Part One} 25:37
6 Tubular Bells {Part Two} 23:24

Mike Oldfield's original 1971 demos

7. Tubular Bells Long 22:57
8. Caveman Lead-In 2:46
9. Caveman 5:05
10. Peace Demo A 7:00
11. Peace Demo B 4:16

Mike Oldfield's rough mix November 1972

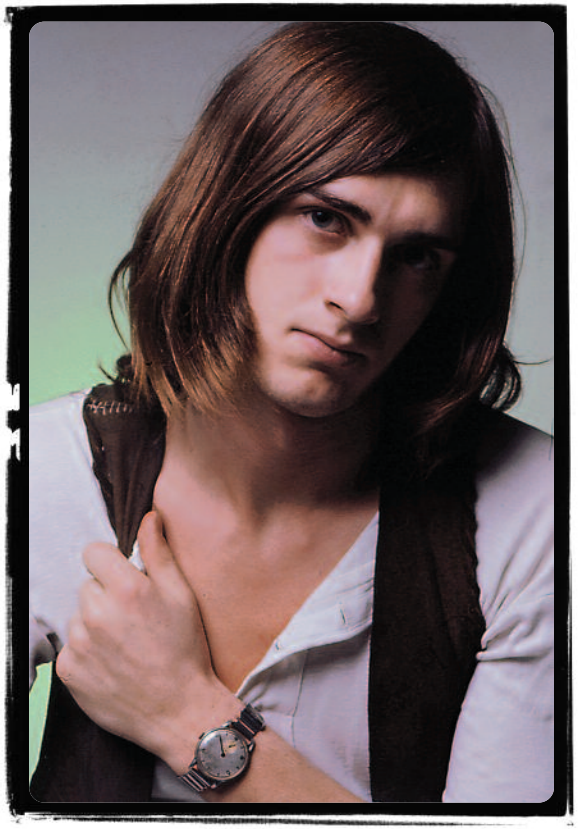
12 Tubular Bells {Part One} 25:12

1976 mIxes for 'Boxed'

13 Tubular Bells {Part One} 25:37
14 Tubular Bells {Part Two} 23:20

Original theme from the Exorcist

15 Tubular Bells 3:18



ON the 25th May 1973 an album was released that would change the perceptions of what was possible in the sphere of popular music. One of the most phenomenal albums ever issued, "Tubular Bells" was an astounding achievement by a gifted musician who had only recently celebrated his twentieth birthday when the record was released.

Viewed over thirty five years later it is difficult for those born in a different age to comprehend the huge impact "Tubular Bells" had on a global record buying public. The sudden and almost immediate commercial and critical impact of "Tubular Bells" belied the fact that the work had taken years to create and that Mike Oldfield had sketched out his rudimentary ideas for the piece as far back as the Autumn of 1971.

1 Beginnings

Despite being only nineteen years old when he recorded this seminal work, Oldfield had in fact been a professional musician since the age of fifteen when he performed with his sister Sally in the duo Sallyangie. When he was as young as thirteen he had performed in folk clubs in the Reading area, becoming an accomplished guitarist inspired by the music and guitar playing of British folk legend John Renbourne, alongside an appreciation of classical music and Flamenco guitar. In 1969 Sallyangie signed to Nat Joseph's Transatlantic label, recording the album "Children of the Sun". The release of the album led to Sallyangie being represented by Roy Guest at the NEMS agency (originally established by Beatles manager Brian Epstein) which in turn was the springboard into a live career. Sallyangie toured the colleges, universities and clubs of Britain for nearly a year, with Mike and Sally's brother Terry acting as driver and road manager.

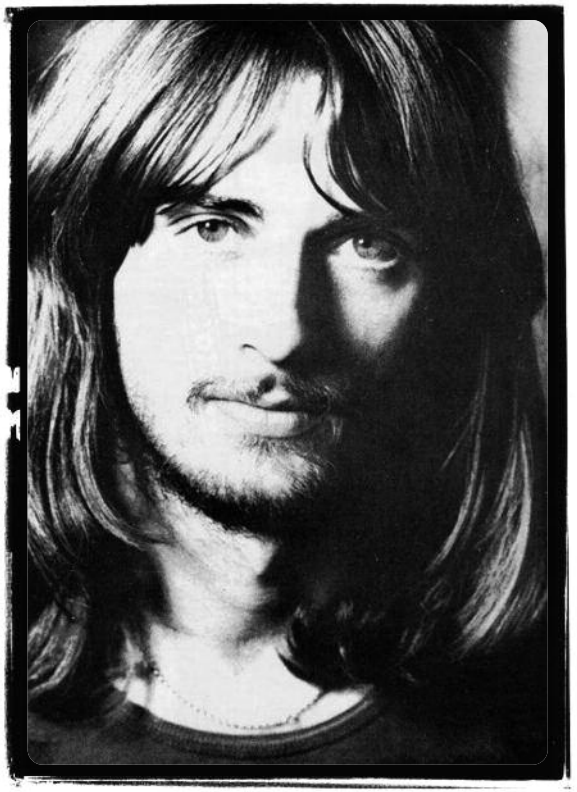
When Transatlantic failed to take up the option of a follow up album, Sallyangie disbanded. Sally Oldfield pursued a career as solo artist, whilst Mike formed the more rock orientated group Barefoot with his brother Terry. Still signed to NEMS, management of Barefoot was passed over to Julia Creasy, assistant to Roy Guest and the duo performed a few concerts before ceasing. However, it was through Julia Creasy that Mike secured his next professional role as a musician. Julia left NEMS agency to work at Blackhill Enterprises, the hippest agency in London at that time. Blackhill was run by Peter Jenner and Andrew King, the first managers of Pink Floyd, and had such leading lights of the UK underground scene as The Edgar Broughton Band, Syd Barrett and Roy Harper on their roster. Blackhill also represented the former Soft Machine bass guitarist Kevin Ayers.

Ayers had struck out on a solo career and had recorded his debut album, "Joy of a Toy", for EMI's progressive label Harvest in 1969. A musical raconteur, Kevin was in the position of assembling a backing group for live and recording work. Upon starting work for Blackhill Julia Creasy brought Mike Oldfield to the attention of the agency. Through the association with Blackhill the young guitarist secured an audition as a bass player in Kevin Ayers' new band. With no experience as a bassist, Oldfield passed the audition using borrowed equipment and in March 1970 he joined saxophonist Lol Coxhill, keyboard player and arranger David Bedford and drummer Mick Fincher in Kevin Ayers and the Whole World, making his concert debut with the band at the Atomic Sunrise Celebration event at the Roundhouse on March 14th.

Kevin Ayers & The Whole World: left to right -
Mick Fincher, David Bedford, Lol Coxhill, Mike Oldfield and Kevin Ayers

In April 1970 Mike participated in the recording sessions at EMI's Abbey Road studios that would produce the album "Shooting at the Moon" (released in October 1970) and continued to tour as a member of The Whole World through the summer. Mick Fincher departed on drums to be replaced by Soft Machine's Robert Wyatt and this line-up performed at a free concert in Hyde Park on July 18th on the same bill as Pink Floyd.

The concert appearance was the biggest event yet undertaken by Oldfield and he soon graduated to playing guitar at various points in Ayers' live set, also performing the solo pieces the "Sailor's Hornpipe" on Mandolin to great enthusiasm from audiences. During this period Oldfield struck up a friendship with David Bedford, who aside from being a respectable keyboard player was also an orchestral arranger of note. Through Bedford Mike was exposed to the composer's avant garde works and to his style of undertaking musical composition. Soon after some concerts in Amsterdam in August 1970, Mike began to suffer from panic attacks and retreated to his parent's home in Harold Wood, Essex. It was here that he found solace in the music of classical composers from Beethoven and Bach to works by Sibelius, Bartok and Stravinsky. Teaching himself musical notation, Oldfield sketched out his musical ideas for piano and guitar in a notebook, devising his own form of musical notation in a chart-like form. Throughout this time he continued to perform as a member of Kevin Ayers and The Whole World, but by the spring of 1971 his anxiety attacks and a general dis-satisfaction with performing in the band led to his departure from the group following the first session for Ayers' next album, "Whatevershebringswesing".



Ayers dissolved The Whole World and assembled a new live band, soon approaching Oldfield to join his new musical outfit. Living with his parents and working on his first rudimentary solo material, Mike agreed to join Ayers' new group on the condition that he had creative input into the arrangement of Ayers' material. To Oldfield's surprise Kevin agreed to these terms and following auditions a new group was assembled comprising David Bedford, bass guitarist Andy Robertson and drummer William Murray. With the new band came a new home in a house in Westbourne Gardens in Tottenham, rented by Ayers.

However, this new arrangement was destined to last only a few months. By July 1971 Kevin Ayers had tired of performing with his new group and accepted an invitation to tour with former Soft Machine band mate Daevid Allen in his new group Gong. Coincidentally, Mike had also begun to tire of being a member of a backing group and was eager to pursue his own musical ideas. Influenced by the music of the large jazz-rock ensemble Centipede formed by pianist Keith Tippett (and featuring such luminaries as Julie Tippett (nee Driscoll), Robert Wyatt, Marc Charig, Ian Carr and Elton Dean among others) and the album "A Rainbow in Curved Air" by minimalist American composer Terry Riley (a work of beauty and ingenuity which featured a mesmerising repetitive keyboard sequence), Mike Oldfield began to formulate ideas for a solo work which he would later describe as being "a way out of the mental anguish I was suffering at the time".

Giving notice to the musicians in his band that he would be moving out of his house in Tottenham, Kevin Ayers offered Mike the use of his Bang and Olufsen Beocord ¼ inch tape recorder upon which he could record some demos of his new music. Thus in a bedroom overlooking the garden of a terraced house in North London, a musical phenomenon was sketched out and conceived. Faced with the fact that Ayers' tape machine was a standard stereo machine with a basic sound on sound facility, Oldfield devised an ingenious method of customising the tape recorder into a machine capable of basic multi-tracking. By taking a screwdriver to the machine he discovered that by some slight rewiring and the blocking of the machine's erase head with a piece of card he could record an instrument on one track on the tape and "bounce" the finished recording to the other track whilst recording a new instrument simultaneously. This method of recording allowed him to build up a piece of music layer upon layer by recording one individual instrument at a time.

Later Mike would reflect; “I loved the whole idea of a repetitive musical sequence. I thought that if I was to make up my own music I wanted to have a repetitive riff at the beginning. Using David Bedford’s Farfisa organ I fiddled around with an idea for a few minutes and came up with a riff I liked. I thought of it as one bar in 7/8 time and one bar in 8/8 or 4/4 time. I wanted to make it slightly different from a 16/8 time signature and so I decided to drop the sixteenth beat. I probably chose the key A minor because it’s the easiest key to play on a keyboard as it uses all of the white keys. I didn’t think about it for very long, it just sounded right to me. I found the record button on the Bang and Olufsen machine and played that riff for about five minutes or so. I listened back to it and the riff stuck. In the last 35 years I’ve been trying to find a better riff, but I can’t, so I’ve given up trying now!”

After laying down the keyboard riff Mike then overdubbed a bass guitar part and then a section using a children’s toy bell tree. Continuing the process Oldfield eventually had produced a demo with seven overdubs that was approximately twenty minutes in length, a major achievement of ingenuity and creativity. Although justly proud of his work on such basic equipment, reaction to the music Mike had created was generally greeted with bemusement by some who heard it.

In January 1972 he participated in further sessions for Kevin Ayers’ “Whatevershebringswesing” album at Abbey Road studios and took the opportunity to play his demo to the gathered musicians. Aside from a favourable reaction from David Bedford, the overall reaction to the music was one of mystified silence. Undaunted Mike presented his demo to Nick Mobbs, A&R head of EMI’s Harvest label, (home to the company’s progressive rock signings) but after some consideration the notion of signing Oldfield and his work to the label was rejected. Similar approaches were made to CBS Records and Pye Records, only to be met with the same indifference. Still residing in a shared house in Tottenham and faced with the need to earn some money Mike took the role of guitarist in the earliest incarnation of the Sensational Alex Harvey Band. Through the contact with Alex Harvey Mike also joined the band of the stage musical “Hair”, of which Harvey was also a member. During this period he also formulated further ideas for his musical demo (at this time known under the working title of “Opus One”).

When the work with the stage band in “Hair” came to an end Mike was approached by Peter Jenner of Blackhill Enterprises with the offer of joining the backing group of singer and guitarist Arthur Louis, a Jimi Hendrix influenced new signing to the Blackhill roster who was seeking a recording contract. As part of this process Louis had been booked into a new recording studio in a manor house in Shipton-on-Cherwell in Oxfordshire. “The Manor” studio was a new enterprise established by a young charismatic man who had founded a student help organisation and publication and had recently opened Virgin Records, a mail order company that specialised in selling records by “progressive” artists from both the UK and Europe. It was here in the early months of 1972 that the fortunes of Mike Oldfield would change considerably.

Richard Branson

2 Opus One

Richard Branson was young entrepreneur who had established the highly successful publication “Student” whilst still a pupil at Stowe public school and by 1970 had set up the Student Advisory Centre in London which gave advice on everything from tenancy rights to issues of contraception and abortion. That year saw Branson devise a mail order company that would tap into the musical tastes of the student fraternity and offer records by artists of the “progressive” and “underground” genres at a discounted price, lower than any high street retailer. “Student” magazine ceased publication and Branson’s attention turned to Caroline Records Mail Order on a full time basis. By early 1971 the operation had opened a shop at the end of London’s Oxford Street under the name of Virgin Records and had established a major position in the marketplace with the album buying audience. Simon Draper, a South African born cousin of Richard Branson’s joined the company. With Virgin Records opening further shops in the UK, the idea of opening a recording studio and record label began to take shape. With a loan of £30,000 from an Aunt, Branson purchased Shipton Manor and set about the task of turning it into a recording studio. To this end Virgin appointed Tom Newman, a former member of psychedelic rock band July, to supervise the conversion of The Manor into a studio. Introduced to Richard Branson by his girlfriend Jackie Byford (who was working for “Student” magazine), Newman had also experimented with early sound-on-sound recording in a similar way to Mike Oldfield.

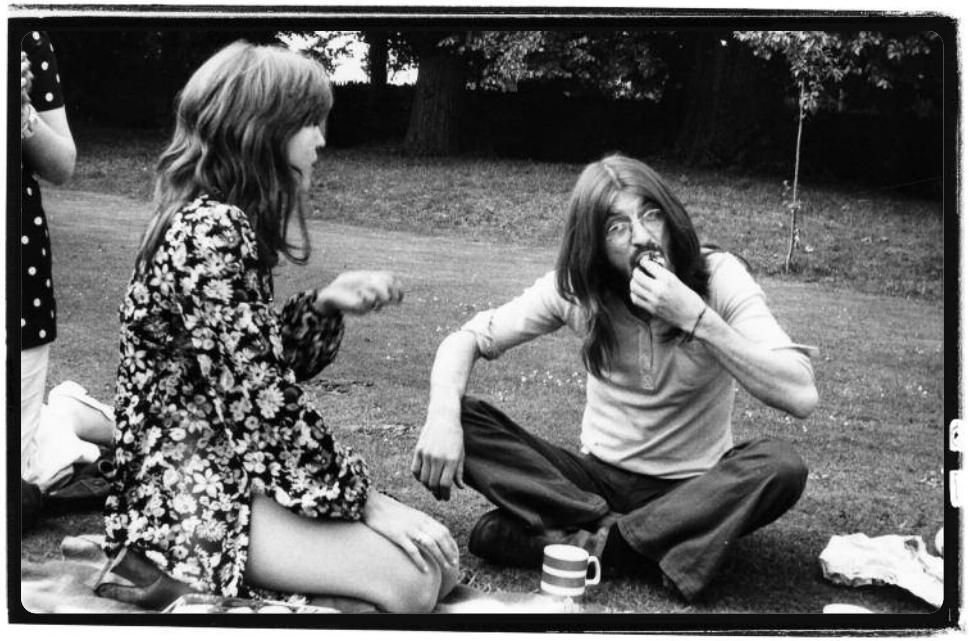
Keen on the idea of opening a recording studio, it was Newman who formulated the concept of Virgin building a recording studio and it was he who first visited the large house in Shipton-on-Cherwell with Richard Branson with a view to purchasing the building after several other premises were rejected.

Tom Newman was joined at The Manor by former Pye Studios engineer Phil Newell and a young aspiring recording engineer by the name of Simon Heyworth in late 1971 to begin work on turning a former Squash court into a commercial studio. With the conversion work dragging on Richard Branson was keen to start seeing a return on his investment and so whilst still only a 4-track recording facility The Manor studio took its first booking from Blackhill Enterprises for a session to record some demos by their new signing Arthur Louis and his band. Tom Newman would later recount; “We’d only just got all the equipment working when we were given a

days notice that a band would be coming in to try out the new studio. It was an abysmal session because things kept breaking down, but in the end we did a creditable job and got something down".

The Arthur Louis Band also used The Manor as a place to rehearse. It whilst there that Mike Oldfield, hired as bass guitarist for the rehearsal and demo sessions, struck up a friendship with Tom Newman. Discovering their mutual love of building and flying model aircraft Oldfield and Newman struck up a rapport. Mike would later remember; "I realised I might have the opportunity to play my demos to the people at The Manor. Unfortunately I'd left the tapes at home.

I mentioned this to Arthur Louis' roadie and he very kindly offered to drive me back to Essex to collect the tapes and then drive me back to Oxfordshire. It was about a three hour drive then. I can't remember his name now, but I really do owe him everything; none of what came later would have happened if it weren't for him". This time Mike Oldfield was pleased to find that the reaction to his demos was very positive. Tom Newman would later comment; "I had never heard anything as good as the demos that Mike played me. After I had heard the music I felt there was a kindred soul in there somewhere".



Jackie Byford with Tony Mellor (Caroline Mail Order)

Explaining that The Manor studio was still unfinished, Tom Newman offered to play the demos to Richard Branson and Simon Draper at Virgin, the idea of the company establishing a record label still some months away. Once the rehearsals and session with Arthur Louis had finished, Mike returned to his parents' house in Harold Wood to work on further musical ideas and grew more despondent by the week. It was as his mood was at its lowest when Mike was called by Simon Draper inviting him to join him and meet with Richard Branson. Arranging to meet in the office above the Virgin record shop in Notting Hill Oldfield met with Simon Draper and was then taken to Richard Branson's house boat in Little Venice for dinner to discuss the possibility of turning Mike's demos into an album. Simon Draper would later remember; "I had first come across Mike when he was playing bass for Kevin Ayers and the Whole World. Then, when he was doing some session work at The Manor he played Tom Newman and Simon Heyworth (who were running the studio), this tape of his music.

They were impressed, to put it mildly, and played the tape to me. I thought it was staggeringly good. It was really incredible because it was the whole first twenty minutes of "Tubular Bells" pretty much as it appeared on the final record. Overdubbing on home equipment was pretty much in its infancy back then, but by putting little bits of card over the recording heads of this tiny four-track tape recorder he'd somehow managed to create a record at his home, this wonderful intricate piece of music". At the end of the dinner Richard Branson agreed to grant a week of studio time in The Manor to record the first part of Mike Oldfield's "Opus One".

Mike Oldfield (left) with Tom Newman and one of the model aircraft

In November 1972 Mike returned to The Manor and found it a very different place to the studio he had visited some months earlier. By now the studio was equipped with the latest 16-track recording equipment and it had started taking bookings by established artists such as John Cale. The instruments Mike had requested were delivered and work began on turning rudimentary demos into an album. Transferring the fragile original demo tape to a four track tape as the first step, Newman and Heyworth listened once more to the music and decided how to proceed on the recording of a work where almost every instrument would be played by Mike Oldfield.

The first instrument to be recorded was a Steinway Grand Piano. Mike later recalled; "I began playing the opening riff without any backing. I started adding a few things but my timing wasn't very good and it just wasn't working. The timing problem was resolved the next day by Simon Heyworth who suggested putting a Metronome in another room next to a microphone and sending the click to me through my headphones. From there it all started to come together. I'd had a more than a year to work out all of the parts to the piece and it all built up nicely with the addition of the double speed electric guitars".

Tom Newman at the mixing desk

The sessions were added to by the presence of Jon Field of the band Jade Warrior who provided flute parts. Also invited was double bass player Lindsay Cooper (once Cellist with the Strawbs) whose presence was also felt. For the climactic section of the piece it had been Mike's intention to have a chord on the organ to rise up to a climax. With pitch bending on a keyboard a thing of the future an ingenious way to achieve this effect was devised. An organ chord was recorded and made into a tape loop. This loop was then placed on a tape machine which was gradually sped up until it reached the correct speed giving the impression of an ascending chord.

Because the studio was also booked by the Bonzo Dog Band who had reformed to record the album "Let's Make Up and Be Friendly", recording time was extremely limited. With a day's recording time left the final repetitive section of the piece was recorded, a section that gradually increased in intensity featuring numerous guitar overdubs of the main riff. With Mike feeling that the finale of the piece required the presence of another instrument thoughts turned to finding a suitable choice. Remembering that John Cale had used a set of tubular bells during his sessions at The Manor, Oldfield suggested that he use them.

Several takes were attempted, but Mike was unhappy with the finished results. He later recalled; "I wasn't happy with the sound of the bells and so I asked if there was a hammer that I could use. This still didn't give the desired effect and so someone found a really big hammer in the garage of the studio. Tom had been messing around with an old compressor and had set that up. I hit the bells with this large hammer and put a huge dent in one of the bells. It made an amazing sound, though and I thought "that's more like it". It was only because those bells were already in the studio that I decided to use them".

The last day of the sessions also produced the idea of introducing each instrument in turn in the finale of the piece. Mike remembered a Bonzo Dog Band track called "The Intro and the Outro" in which band member Vivian Stanshall introduced members of a surreal band. With Stanshall having dinner in the room next to the studio Simon Heyworth asked him if he would act as a Master of Ceremonies on the recording. Three decades later Mike would remember; "Viv was a kind of superstar in those days. I couldn't believe he agreed to do it. Although he was a little worse off for drink he was charming and respectful. I wrote everything out for him and pointed to each line when it was time for him to introduce each instrument. He really got into the spirit of it and did it in one take. When he said "plus tubular bells!" it was just perfect. During that long session we consumed quantities of Guinness".

The consumption of Guinness led to the idea of recording "The Sailor's Hornpipe", a live favourite during Mike's days with Kevin Ayers and the Whole World. Setting up microphones along the corridors of The Manor, Oldfield and Newman followed an intoxicated Viv Stanshall along the passageways playing the traditional tune, whilst the Bonzo Dog frontman assumed the humorous role of a radio announcer inspecting artefacts both real and fictitious.

Mike now remembers; "I had heard about this new technology called Quadraphonic sound and so I thought that it would be great to put microphones all round the Manor house and to record myself, Tom and Viv Stanshall walking round the house playing the Sailor's Hornpipe with Viv speaking a commentary about the house. The movement of us all could pan around the four speakers as if we were actually moving round the house. As it turned out, Quadraphonic was a disappointment at that time and also Viv could not follow us because the microphone cable got tangled up. Now with 5.1 Surround Sound it's possible so have a listen to what I originally intended".

The light relief over, the task of mixing the piece remained. Mike later recalled; "We had a piece of music that was twenty four minutes long and we only had the rest of the night to do a mix for Richard Branson and Simon Draper to listen to. During that long session, aside from consuming quantities of Guinness, I learned how a mixing desk worked. We finished that rough mix just as the sun came up and I rolled off to bed".

With the Bonzo Dog Band now in residence in the studio Mike Oldfield remained at The Manor. A few days later Simon Draper heard the rough mix of the first part of "Opus One". He would later recount; "As soon as I heard it I was bowled over". Impressed with the finished results Draper and Branson consented to Mike completing an album by recording a second part of the work at The Manor in "down time" in the evening when other acts weren't using the studio. By now plans were hatched to launch Virgin as a record label.

A party on the lawn at the Manor

Much of the work on the second part of “Opus One” was done at night with Simon Heyworth engineering. Vocal overdubs were undertaken with Sally Oldfield and Mundy Ellis to complete the closing section of the first part recorded in the intense seven day session. Also added was a beautiful acoustic guitar part which acted as a coda to part one.

Much of the music for the second part of the album was created in the down time at The Manor. Some sections had begun life as ideas in 1971, such as the section known as “Caveman”. The beautiful mandolin parts that preceded this section had begun life as a demo some months earlier, with the finished double speed mandolins sounding magnificent. For the “Caveman” section Steve Broughton, drummer with the Edgar Broughton Band, was called upon to contribute his percussive skills. Both Kevin Ayers and the Broughton’s had been part of the Blackhill stable of artists and were both signed to EMI’s Harvest label, and Steve’s drumming part was recorded accompanying Oldfield’s bass guitar line. When overdubbed with electric and acoustic guitars this section was one of the highlights of part two.

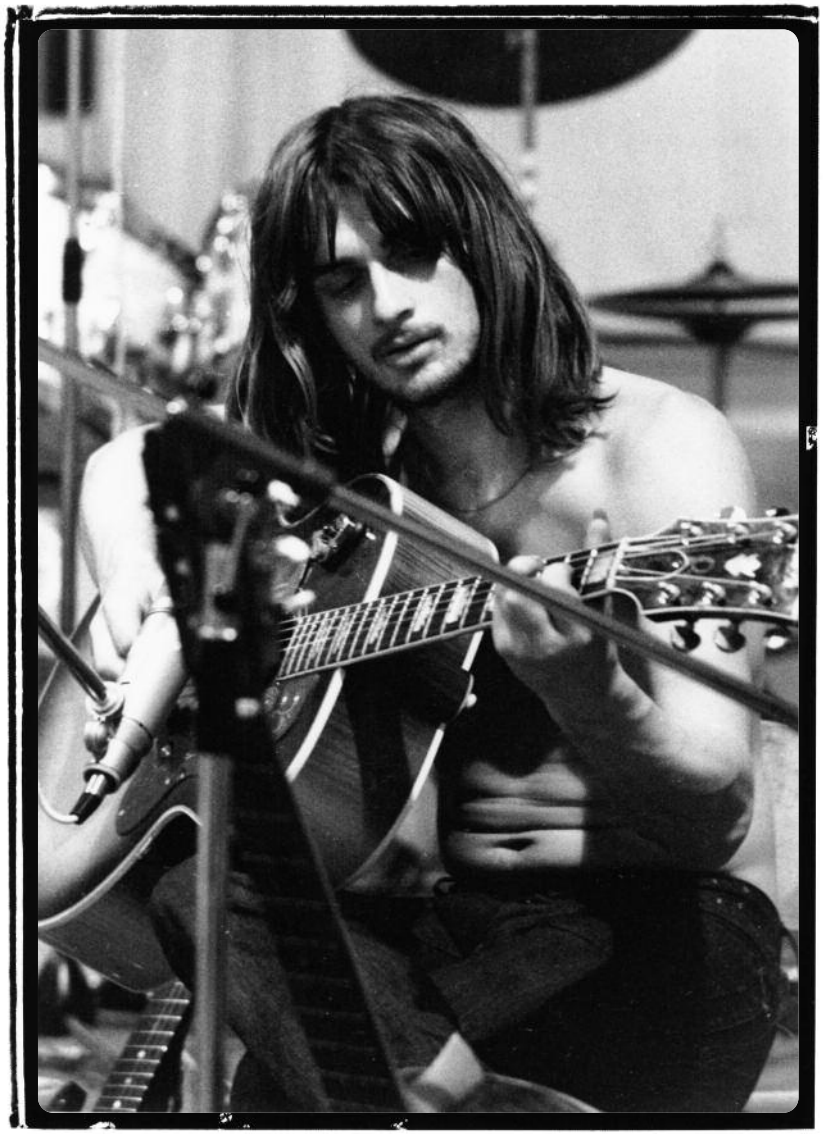
The recording sessions were interrupted by the arrival of another band who had block booked The Manor and with the advent of Christmas. With life at his parent’s home in Essex proving traumatic it was with some relief that Oldfield returned to the confines of The Manor in February 1973 to complete work on his album. The section to be known as “Caveman” took on new life when Mike overdubbed Neanderthal-like screaming noises. It was intended that the end section of part two “Opus One” would comprise the “Sailor’s Hornpipe” recording made with Viv Stanshall the previous year, but this was later deemed to be too bizarre a concept to close such a radically different album, thus the piece was re-recorded in a more sober state in a more conventional way.

The final mixing of the album would prove to be an involved process. Long before the days of automated mixing desks, the sessions involved the hands of Newman, Oldfield, Heyworth and two others. With different effects being applied in different sections of each part mixes had to be undertaken in a single pass of the multi-track tape and were rehearsed several times, much like preparing for a live performance. The slightest error by any one person meant that the entire process had to be started from the beginning once more. The track sheets (which gave details of where instruments were on each track of the tape) were incredibly detailed due to more than one instrument occupying an individual track. Another problem was that the multi-track tape had been passed over the heads of the tape machine so many times due the process of winding and rewinding that they had begun to wear out. Despite such adversity, in the early spring of 1973 mixing was finished and the album was completed.

Richard Branson and Simon Draper took the album to the annual MIDEM music business conference in Cannes, where record companies from all over the world gathered to present their wares. Listeners to the recordings expressed doubt about the viability of releasing such a record due to the instrumental nature of the work. Branson even briefly considered adding lyrics and vocals to the recording, but after much understandable concern from Oldfield this idea was soon thankfully shelved.

3 Tubular Bells

With work on the album completed and a release date set, thoughts now turned to giving a title to the recordings known to all who worked on them as “Opus One”. Mike Oldfield recalled; “Everyone was getting a bit angry with me because I couldn’t think of a name for the album. Richard Branson had a picture of a boiled egg which appeared to have blood oozing out if it instead of a yolk. He was thinking of calling the album “Breakfast in Bed”. I had been introduced to the photographer Trevor Key who specialised in taking black and white photos of chrome objects. He was going to design the cover. He came to see me in Harold Wood and after some discussion we came up with the idea of having the image of a bell which had been destroyed in some way on the sleeve as a reference to me denting the bell during the recording sessions. It was then when I came up with the idea of calling it “Tubular Bells”. I called Richard and everyone agreed it was a good title. Trevor went down to the south coast and photographed an image of some bones burning on a beach and then superimposed that photograph with an image of a model he had made of a twisted bell. When I saw it I thought it was just perfect”. A spot of humour was also added with a statement on the back sleeve of the album which declared “This stereo record cannot be played on old tin boxes no matter what they are fitted with. If you are in possession of such equipment please hand it into the nearest police station”.



Thus on May 25th 1973, “Tubular Bells” by Mike Oldfield was released as Virgin Records V 2001. Simon Draper would later reflect; “Right from the day that I introduced “Tubular Bells” to the Island Records sales force, who along with EMI, were distributing our records for us, everyone thought it was fantastic. The album just took off and gathered momentum in a massive way because it was so extraordinary, so different from anything else that had gone before it”. Sales of the album began to take off when respected radio DJ John Peel, who was immensely impressed by the record, played the both sides of the album on his BBC Radio One show. Peel also wrote a review of the album for “The Listener” magazine, stating; “Without borrowing anything from established classics or descending into the discords, squeals and burps of the determinedly avant-garde, Mike Oldfield has produced music which combines logic with surprise, sunshine with rain”. Of the weekly music press Steve Peacock in “Sounds” declared; “I ended up convinced that it really is a remarkable album – and that isn’t an adjective I’m using lightly”.

For “Melody Maker”, Geoff Brown wrote; “It is an enjoyable and evocative album which bodes well for the future of the country’s newest label, and of Mike Oldfield”.

Richard Branson and Simon Draper decided that another way to present the album to more journalists and a wider public was by organising a concert performance of the work at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. “When Richard told me I had to do a concert of “Tubular Bells” my heart sank. I just couldn’t see how the music could be performed in a live setting. I initially refused to do it” recalled Mike. Considering his options Richard Branson suggested a compromise. He would later remember; “We’d been to see a host of celebrated musicians, played each of them “Tubular Bells”, and persuaded them to play this one-off gig, but Mike said that he couldn’t go through with it; he just couldn’t do it. Whether through a flash of instinct or desperation, I remembered that Mike wanted my beautiful old Bentley which I’d bought from George Harrison. I said “Look Mike, if you do the show you can have my car”. The psychological block somehow got sorted out because he looked up and said “Okay, I’ll do it”, much to my relief”.

A cast of musicians including guitarist Mick Taylor of the Rolling Stones, guitarist Steve Hillage, drummer Steve Broughton, guitarist Fred Frith of Henry Cow, David Bedford, Viv Stanshall and guitarist Ted Speight gathered together at Shepperton film studios to rehearse. Oldfield later reflected; “I was stood back stage at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and was absolutely terrified. To me the music hadn’t sounded good at the rehearsals and I was convinced it was going to go down badly. Mick Taylor brought Mick Jagger into my dressing room and he was very supportive. That gave me the confidence to at least walk on stage. When the concert was over I was stunned when the entire audience stood up and clapped. Once the concert was over I fled in Richard Branson’s Bentley”. The critical reaction to the concert was overwhelming. On the 14th July 1973 “Tubular Bells” entered the British album charts where it was to remain for 264 weeks, a staggering achievement.

Rehearsing at Shepperton Studios, June 1973

The experience of performing “Tubular Bells” had been an unpleasant one for Mike Oldfield. He refused to perform further concerts, although he consented to recording a performance of “Tubular Bells Part One” for the BBC TV programme “2nd House”, recorded on 30th November 1973. Broadcast the next day, the performance featured a different musical ensemble to the Queen Elizabeth Hall concert.

The success of the album was boosted still further when director William Friedkin selected the opening theme of the first part of “Tubular Bells” for inclusion in his film “The Exorcist”. Atlantic Records handled Virgin’s releases in the USA at that time and requested to release an excerpt from “Tubular Bells” as a single. Issued under the title “Mike Oldfield’s Theme to the Exorcist”, this single edit was released on February 23rd 1974 and reached number 7 on the US Billboard Chart. Although the single was the contributing factor to the success of the album in America, the edit had not been approved by Oldfield who was most unhappy with the release. Now residing in the village of Kington in Herefordshire in a house called The Beacon, Oldfield shied away from the glaring light of publicity, installing recording equipment and beginning work on his next album.

As a response to the release of the US single, Mike re-recorded the tranquil mandolin section from part two of “Tubular Bells” with musician Lindsay Cooper from Henry Cow playing Oboe. Thirty five years later Mike recalls “I can’t remember where I was at the time but Richard Branson rang me up and said that he had been talking to George Martin and that George had an idea for a single that I could make to promote “Tubular Bells”. My memory is that Richard put George on the phone and as far as I remember George said I should make a track using the Celtic Tympani section from Part Two with acoustic guitars and maybe an oboe. I was a bit stunned by having spoken to the great George Martin but that’s what I did, somehow, at some studio, somewhere? Anyway I have revamped it a bit in 2009 and now I like it a lot”.

The track was released as the A-side of the single Virgin VS 101 on 28th June 1974 under the title “Mike Oldfield’s Single (Theme from Tubular Bells)”. Whilst the American success of “Tubular Bells” led to further demands for Mike Oldfield to travel to the USA to tour, he rejected all offers. In his Herefordshire home he was working hard on the music that would become the album “Hergest Ridge”.

“Tubular Bells” is an iconic album that defied the established preconceptions of what was achievable with the studio technology of the time. The record’s success was effectively the building block upon which Virgin became a household name and one of the most recognised brands in the world. Most importantly of all, “Tubular Bells” introduced the record buying public to the musical genius of Mike Oldfield. Thirty six years on, Mike has revisited the original multi-track recordings once more to produce wonderful new stereo and 5.1 Surround Sound mixes of his seminal work and “Tubular Bells” remains as fresh and as vital a piece of music as it was when it first appeared.

Mark Powell

(With grateful thanks to Mike Oldfield)

Taming the ‘Tubular Bells’ tape monster

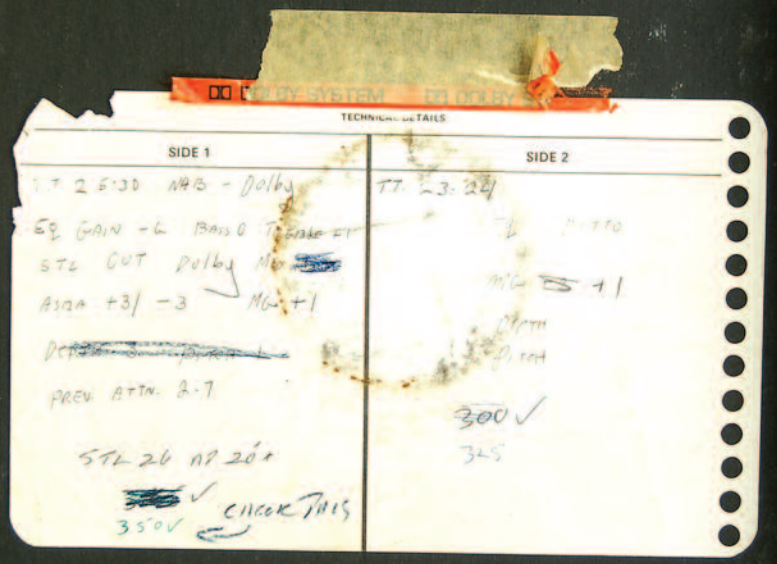
Tubular Bells 2009 Project Directors: Mike Oldfield, Adam Barker and Daryl Easlea

Product manager: Joe Black

Master tape research and artist liaison by Mark Powell (with thanks to Mike Oldfield)

Recording engineers: Tom Newman and Simon Heyworth

Stereo remixes of "Tubular Bells" engineered and produced by Mike Oldfield



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